

## Investigating the Impact of Birt–Hogg–Dubé Syndrome Associated Folliculin (FLCN) and Retinitis Pigmentosa 2 (RP2) Loss on Cilia Function and Morphology

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### Research Article

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### ABSTRACT

Folliculin (FLCN), a GTPase-activating protein (GAP), has been linked to Birt–Hogg–Dubé syndrome, the mTORC1 signaling pathway and cilia. Disruptions in cilia structure and function lead to a group of diseases known as ciliopathies. Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome is one of 35 different ciliopathy diseases and there are more than 250 genes that cause ciliopathy diseases. FLCN interacts with kinesin-2 along cilia. The specific role of FLCN in regulating Kinesin-IFT trafficking has, however, remained unclear. In the current study, we investigated the effects of *flcn-1* loss (the human ortholog of FLCN) on kinesin and IFT trafficking in *C. elegans*. The loss of *flcn-1* alone did not result in any apparent alterations to kinesin or IFT trafficking within the cilia. However, when we combined the deletion of *flcn-1* with the deletion of Retinitis Pigmentosa 2 (RP2), another GAP protein, the ciliary entry of a non-ciliary membrane protein TRAM-1 (Translocation Associated Membrane Protein 1) occurred. Additionally, although cilia length was unaltered, our analysis of double mutants revealed the extra branch in wing AWB cilia morphology but not the single rod-like PHA/PHB cilia. In summary, our study reveals the previously unknown functions of FLCN in ciliary gating and cilia morphology in *C. elegans*.

**Keywords:** Folliculin, Cilia, Retinitis pigmentosa 2, Ciliary gate.<sup>a</sup> [oktay.kaplan@agu.edu.tr](mailto:oktay.kaplan@agu.edu.tr)<sup>ID</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8733-0920>

### Introduction

Cilia were the first cellular organelles discovered by scientists and are characterized by the presence of microtubules as a fundamental structure [1]. The terms "motile" and "non-motile" (primary cilium) refer to two functionally and structurally distinct forms of cilia [2]. In unicellular organisms, cilia serve a crucial function in enabling the mobility of the whole organism. In higher multicellular organisms, it has been demonstrated that cilia are important not only for cellular motility and sensation but also for crucial embryonic developmental processes [2,3]. Both the motile and primary cilia are involved in a variety of rare diseases, collectively known as ciliopathies. More than 50 cilia-related disorders exist, with more than 4000 distinct symptoms [4].

A bi-directional movement process spanning the entire length of cilia was initially discovered in 1993 in the single-celled green alga *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii*, and this phenomenon was termed intraflagellar transport (IFT) [5, 6]. Further analysis, including the biochemical isolation of IFT components and genomic comparisons across various species, revealed that IFT components and motor proteins, such as cytoplasmic dynein and kinesin, are conserved in ciliated organisms [7, 8]. Subsequent work revealed that the cilia host different types of proteins, including signaling molecules, small GTPase, GTPase-activating proteins (GAP) proteins, and membrane. Folliculin (FLCN) is a protein that functions as a tumor suppressor and acts as a GTPase-activating protein (GAP). Specifically, FLCN activates the GTPase enzymes RagC and RagD. FLCN plays essential roles in a range of cellular activities, including cilia function, apoptosis, cell proliferation, and autophagy, and was implicated in Birt–

Hogg–Dubé syndrome, a cancer-related syndrome [9-13]. Notably, it has been reported to reside within cilia, where it forms interactions with kinesin-2 (the anterograde kinesin motor responsible for IFT) [9, 13, 14]. The ciliary localization of FLCN is dependent on its binding with kinesin-2. Furthermore, FLCN has been associated with the regulation of mTORC1 signaling, and the loss of FLCN leads to aberrant mTORC1 signaling [9, 15]. However, the role of FLCN in the IFT trafficking remains unknown.

In our study, we obtained a null allele of *C. elegans* FLCN (*flcn-1*) and observed that the loss of *flcn-1* resulted in a normal length of cilia, which is consistent with findings in mammals. There are no notable IFT trafficking defects in *flcn-1* mutants. However, we observed defects in cilia morphology when FLCN deletion was coupled with the GTPase activating protein RP2 (Retinitis pigmentosa 2), but cilia length was not affected. Notably, in *flcn-1;rpi-2* double mutants, a non-cilia localizing transmembrane protein was observed to enter cilia, suggesting a potential role for FLCN in regulating ciliary gate control. In summary, our analysis of null mutants has unveiled previously undisclosed functions of FLCN in cilia.

### Materials and Methods

#### Materials

In the preparation of Nematode Growth Medium (NGM), we used the following reagents and materials: NaCl, Agar, Peptone, cholesterol (5 mg/ml in ethanol), KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, K<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub>, MgSO<sub>4</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>O, and 6 cm Petri plates. The medium was sterilized in an autoclave, cooled, and then

placed on Petri plates under carefully controlled conditions. These petri plates were maintained at room temperature for 48 hours, after which they were evenly coated with OP50, an *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) derivative.

### Genetics Cross and Worm Maintenance

We employed forward and reverse primers to track mutations in both *flcn-1(ok975)* and *rpi-2(ok1863)* to carry out genetic crosses with the wild type. Specifically, strains GOU2362, *ift-74(cas499[ift-74::gfp])*, N2;Ex[OSM-3::GFP + pRF4], N2;Ex[MKS-2::GFP + TRAM-1::tdTOMATO + pRF4], or *str-1pro::mCherry* were crossed with *flcn-1(ok975)*, *rpi-2(ok1863)* single mutants, as well as *flcn-1(ok975); rpi-2(ok1863)* double mutants [10, 16].

Primers

*flcn-1(ok975)*F 5'GGACCTGCCTTCTGTCAAATG 3' (OK698)  
*flcn-1(ok975)*R 5'GGTAGAATCCTCGCGCTTTC 3' (OK699)  
*rpi-2(ok1863)*F 5'GAGACGCAGACATCTCATCTG 3' (OK589)  
*rpi-2(ok1863)*R 5' CAGGTCGTTCTCGGACATCAC3' (OK590)

### Microscopy Analysis

Transgenic strains expressing *ift-74(cas499[ift-74::gfp])*, N2;Ex[MKS-2::GFP + TRAM-1::tdTOMATO + pRF4], or *str-1pro::mCherry* were imaged with the Zeiss LSM 900 confocal microscope as previously described [16].

### Statistical Significance

When comparing the statistical significance of cilia lengths, we used the Kruskal-Wallis test in the R programming ("R version 4.2.2 (2022-10-31)").

## Results and Discussion

### A Transmembrane Protein from outside of Cilia Enters Cilia in the loss of both Folliculin (FLCN) and Retinitis Pigmentosa 2 (RP2)

Our previous work implicated GTPase-activating proteins (GAP) proteins, including RP2 (Retinitis pigmentosa 2) and ELMOD3 (ELMO Domain Containing 3) in restricting the ciliary entry of TRAM-1 (Translocation Associated Membrane Protein 1) [16]. TRAM-1 (Translocation Associated Membrane Protein 1) is a transmembrane protein that localizes to the periciliary membrane compartment but does not normally enter into cilia. We investigated the role of a GAP protein FLCN in limiting access of TRAM-1 to cilia. We obtained a previously characterized mutant of *flcn-1(ok975)* from the Caenorhabditis Genetics Center (CGC), Minnesota, USA, and established a PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) based genotyping strategy. We next crossed N2;Ex[MKS-2::GFP + TRAM-1::tdTOMATO + pRF4] into *flcn-1(ok975)* to visualize both TRAM-1 and the transition zone marked with MKS-2::GFP (Fig. 1a and b.). Interestingly, TRAM-1::tdTOMATO was present in the cilium of the double mutants *flcn-1* (the human ortholog of FLCN);*rpi-2* (the human ortholog of RP2) but lacking in the single mutants and wild type, suggesting FLCN and RP2 may play a role in restricting entry of non-ciliary transmembrane protein into cilia.

### Cilia Morphology is Impacted by the loss of both Folliculin (FLCN) and Retinitis Pigmentosa 2 (RP2)

We next investigated the role of folliculin and RP2 in the transport of intraflagellar transport (IFT), a bidirectional motility process along the cilia. We especially wanted to find out the effects of the absence of both RPI-2 and FLNC-2 on IFT transport. We chose the human ortholog of kinesin motor KIF17 (OSM-3), and an IFT-A complex subunit, namely intraflagellar transporter protein 140 (IFT140) (the human ortholog of IFT140). Subsequently, we generated single and double mutants with them. Normally, fluorescence tagged OSM-3 and IFT-140 localize to the cilia and translocate along the cilia. Our confocal microscopy revealed that the localizations of the kinesin motor and IFT-140 are unaffected in both single and double mutants (Fig. 2a.).

Furthermore, we measured the cilia length in wild type, single and double mutants, and found that the length of cilia is comparable with that of wild type (Fig. 2b.). However, the cilia morphology of AWB cilia, Y-like cilia structure, has more extra branches in the *flcn-1;rpi-2* double mutants (Fig. 3a and b.).

## Conclusions

Our current study provides the first evidence for the potential role of Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome associated folliculin (FLCN) in controlling the ciliary gate. Our previous work had already implicated the two GAP proteins (Retinitis Pigmentosa 2 and ELMO Domain Containing protein) in this process [16]. Surprisingly, in both the FLCN and RP2 single and double mutants, the length of the cilia is unchanged, but the existence of extra branches in the AWB cilia morphology of the *flcn-1;rpi-2* double mutants raises the possibility that FLCN and RP2 are involved in the regulation of structural integrity of the cilia.

The role of folliculin in regulating the ciliary gate control is undeniably intriguing. There are, in fact, two distinct possibilities that could potentially explain the observed ciliary gate defects in the *flcn-1;rpi-2* double mutants. Firstly, it is widely recognized that the transition zone (TZ) plays a key role in governing ciliary gating, with proteins residing in the TZ known to influence this process [17]. FLCN and RP2 could potentially impact the function or localization of proteins within the transition zone, potentially facilitating the entry of non-membrane proteins into the cilia due to their loss. Alternatively, the disruption in the intraflagellar transport (IFT) process could be responsible for the ciliary entry of membrane proteins in the *flcn-1;rpi-2* double mutants. However, the lack of FLCN and RP2 did not affect the ciliary localization of the kinesin motor KIF17 (OSM-3) and the IFT-A complex member IFT140. Thus, a defect in IFT trafficking may not explain the potential mechanism behind the ciliary leakiness of non-ciliary membrane proteins. Further in-depth analysis is warranted to unravel this intriguing phenomenon. Taken together, our work expands our understanding of FLCN and RP2 in cilia biology, offering valuable insights into their contributions to ciliary gate control and morphology. Further studies may uncover the precise mechanisms underlying these intriguing observations and their implications for cellular processes.

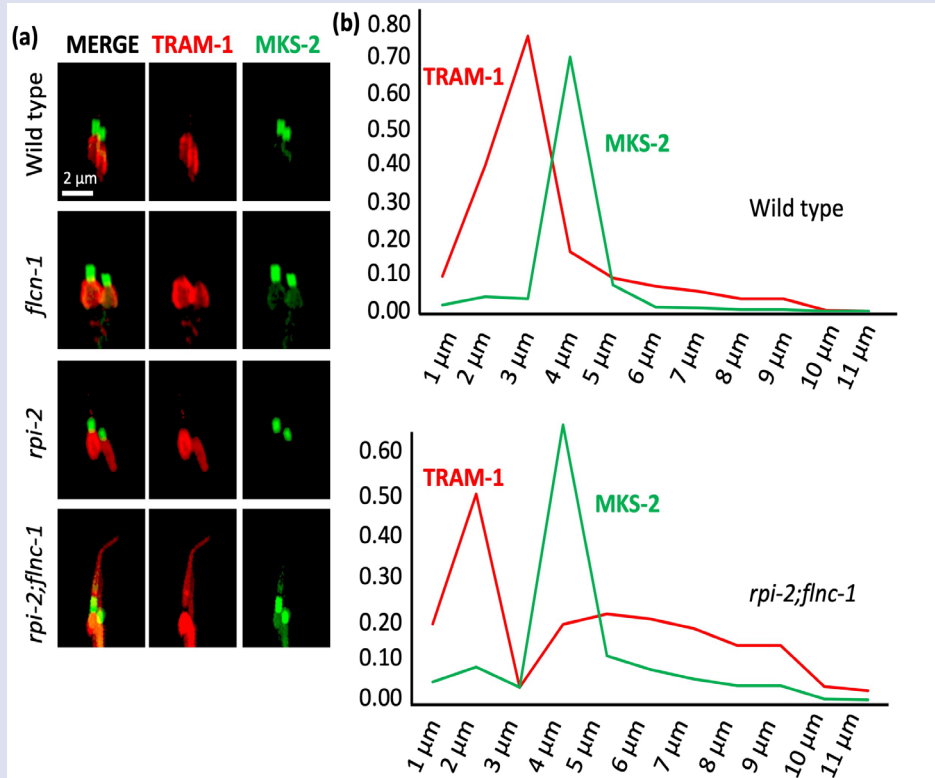


Figure 1. (a) Shown are localizations of MKS-2::GFP (green) and TRAM-1::tdTOMATO (red) in the corresponding mutants and wild type. (b) The line plot displays normalized measurements of MKS-2::GFP and TRAM-1::tdTOMATO along the distal dendrite to the cilia.

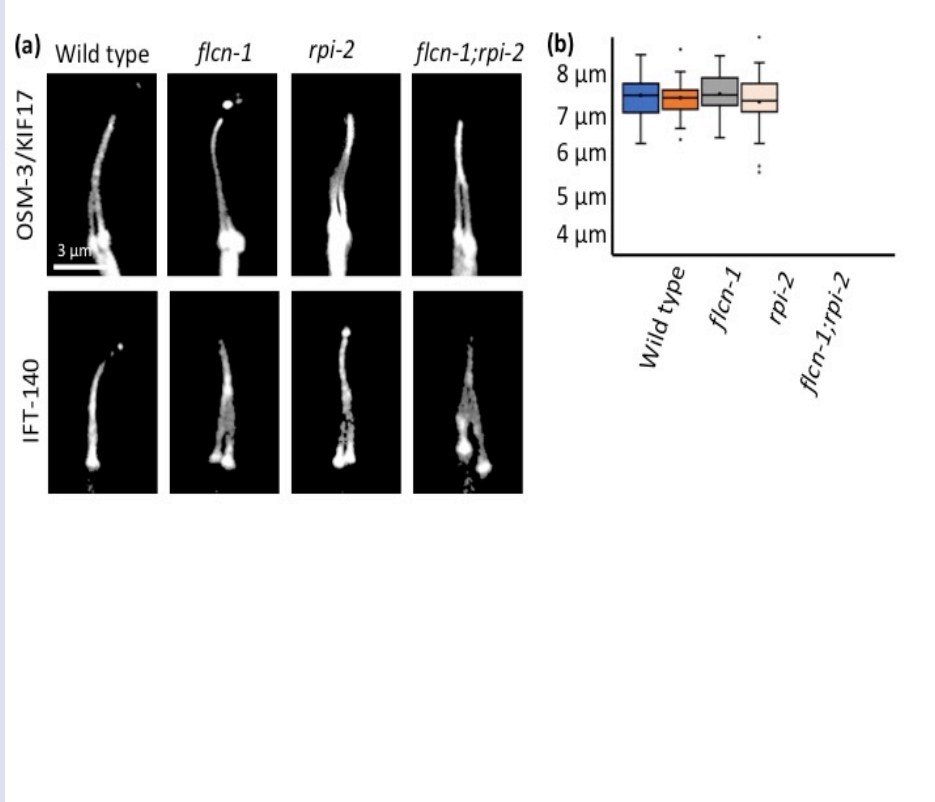


Figure 2. (a) The localization of IFT-140::GFP and OSM-3::GFP (human KIF17) were shown in the wild type and respective mutants. (b) The cilia length measurements were presented for the wild type and indicated mutants. There is no noticeable statistical significance in the cilia length between any of the mutants and the wild type.

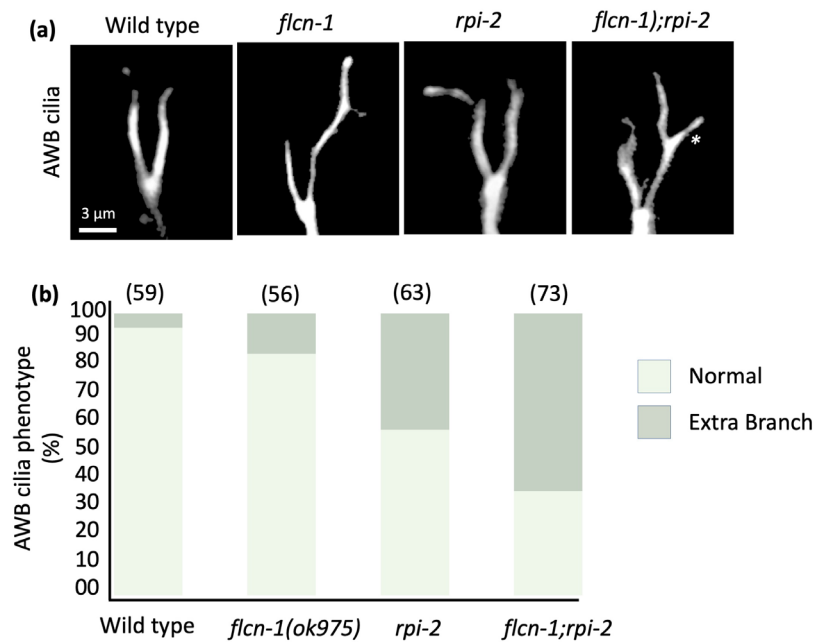


Figure 3. (a) Images for AWB cilia were displayed for wild type and indicated mutants. (b) The percentage of AWB cilia with branches and mutants displaying normal morphology was visualized in a stacked bar plot for both the wild type and the indicated mutant strains. The number of AWB cilia counted is displayed at the top of the plot within parentheses.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that, there are no conflicts of interest in this work.

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